

Sūrah 90

Al-Balad

(The City)

(Makkan Period)

Title

The expression *al-balad* (the city) occurring in the *Sūrah*'s opening verse came to be known as its title.

Period of Revelation

Both the *Sūrah*'s style and its contents are identical with those of early Makkhan *Sūrahs*. A clue in the text suggests that it was revealed when the unbelieving Makkans had unleashed torture and persecution of the Muslims and had become totally opposed to the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Subject Matter and Contents

A broad, extensive theme is succinctly discussed in this *Sūrah*. It is to the miraculous brevity and pithiness of the Qur'ān that a whole worldview, one that would usually require huge volumes to state, is articulated forcefully in this short *Sūrah*, with its brief verses. This *Sūrah* throws light on man's place and role in the

world, and how he should treat the world. It also explains that Allah has facilitated for man his pursuit of the highroad – whether it be of either good or evil. It is man's choice and effort whether he earns divine reward by following the straight way or incurs self destruction by taking to the path of error and evil.

First, the city of Makkah, the persecution directed against the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the general condition of mankind are cited as pieces of evidence to affirm that this world is not a bed of roses for man. Rather, he has been created into toil and hardship. This brings to mind another Qur'anic verse of similar import: "Man shall have nothing but what he has striven for," (*al-Najm* 53: 39). On reading both verses together it is crystal clear that man's ultimate end depends upon his own choice and effort.

Man is asked to shed the delusion that he is not accountable to anyone. On the contrary, his Lord fully knows who has strayed from His path and who is rightly guided.

Amid the many mistaken notions entertained by man, special mention is made in this *Sūrah* of his vanity, of his showing off. He takes pride in his extravagance and is applauded for his spending by those around him. However, Allah closely watches how he amassed his wealth and how and where he spent it.

Allah has invested man with the means of knowledge, a thinking mind and the faculty of discernment to distinguish between good and evil. Both the highroads of good and evil are clearly marked out for him. One path lands him in the abyss of moral degeneration. One does not have to undergo any hardship in following this path. Rather, one enjoys it. The other path is, no doubt, a steep one. For, one has to restrain oneself. Out of his humanness, man, however, prefers the former, rather than the latter.

The path leading to eternal success is clearly spelled out in this *Sūrah*. Far from spending his wealth for making a show, man should use it to help orphans and the indigent. He should believe in Allah, join the community of believers and construct a society in which people enjoin upon one another steadfastness and compassion. This will win him Allah's pleasure. On the contrary, those pursuing the former path shall have Hellfire upon them; never will they be able to escape it.